

Al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS: Tracking the Shift in Women's Involvement

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By Anna T. Beavers

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Approved by

Advisor: Professor Ashleen Williams

Reader: Dr. Timothy Russell

Reader: Dr. Douglas Sullivan-Gonzalez

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ABSTRACT

Al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS: Tracking the Shift in Women's Involvement

By Anna Beavers

(Under the direction of Ashleen Williams)

This paper discusses the shift in women's roles in Islamic extremist groups over the last two decades. Focusing on three violent Sunni groups, al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS, the research aims to fill gaps in United States and global counterterrorism and reintegration efforts by providing a comprehensive, accurate, and timely assessment of the recent change in women's roles in terrorist organizations, shifting from foundational to limited operational to fully operational. The shift occurred and continues to unfold as several moving parts have fallen into place to create this situation. Women's desire to participate at a more operational level, the need on behalf of the organization(s) to employ female combatants, and the willingness of Muslim religious scholars and leaders to permit female involvement in jihadist operations. While many disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs consider gender, there is need for a more nuanced gender-based approach which utilizes the knowledge of *why* this shift is occurring and how it affects women's place within these groups and their societies.

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GLOSSARY

AQI: formerly al-Qaida in Iraq (2003-2009), became ISIS in 2009

‘Alim: literally translated – “all knowing”, a Muslim learned in religious matters

Amir: a ruler, chief, or commander in Islamic countries

Burqa: an example of a “full hijab”, an enveloping outer garment worn by Muslim women for the purpose of hiding her body when out in public

Caliphate: the political-religious state comprising the Muslim community and the lands and peoples under its dominion in the centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Ruled by a caliph (successor of Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community)

DAESH: term for ISIS. Abbreviation for ad-dawla al-islamiyya fi l-iraq was-sam (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام) meaning, “State Islamic of Iraq and the Levant”

Dar al-Islam: “abode of Islam”, used by Muslim scholars to refer to those countries where Muslims can practice their religion as the ruling sect

Fatwah: a legal opinion or ruling issued by an Islamic scholar

Jihad: struggle or religious war

Kuffar: infidel, rejecter, unbeliever

Mahram: unmarriageable kin with whom marriage or sexual intercourse would be considered haram (illegal) in Islam

Mujahidat: a female fighter in religious war. Regarded by Jihadi-Salafism as the vanguard and highest form of activism and self-realization.

Quran: the Muslim book of revelations, holy book

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Shariah: Islamic law. According to Salafis all political systems should be based exclusively on Islamic law

Sunna: the exemplary, perfect habits and ways of the Prophet, transmitted from him in the ahadith (tradition or saying of the Prophet Muhammad)

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background: A History of Female Fighters

“Terrorism is to kill one and frighten 10,000 others.”

-Chinese Proverb

Introduction

Mosul, Iraq – a city once under control by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – was liberated in July 2017 by Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) with aid from the U.S. and its allies. The city was seized by ISIS in June 2014 and it wasn't until the Iraqi Government launched a campaign with allied militias and international forces that Mosul was retaken. As Iraqi forces gained ground around the city, ISIS forces fought to maintain power. One of the group's last efforts of violence before losing this ground to opposing forces was a suicide bombing which killed at least 15 people.¹

Although a common tactic by violent Sunni extremists, this suicide bombing caught the opposing forces off guard. As Iraqi soldiers flooded into Mosul to retake the city, civilians fled the area – women and children poured out of buildings, taking with them what belongings they could carry. The last neighborhood cleared by troops was Mosul's Old City, and it was there that two women ran from the basement of a building, fleeing with the rest of the civilians.²

¹ “ISIS Women Suicide Bombers Attack Soldiers in Mosul,” USA TODAY, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/07/03/isis-women-suicide-bombers/447560001/>.

² “ISIS Women Suicide Bombers”

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However, hidden under their abayas (traditional all-covering robes) were bombs which they detonated as they made their way into the street among the Iraqi soldiers. Later that week another female militant hiding bombs under her robes killed 14 people in Iraq's western Anbar province at a camp for displaced people. Toward the end of ISIS's reign, another woman in Mosul detonated a bomb while she was carrying her baby in her arms. Both she and the child died, and several Iraqi soldiers were wounded.³

The attacks in Mosul represent the growing involvement of women in Islamic terrorism. Female membership in terrorist organizations has recently increased 15%.⁴ This is largely due to groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Qaida who are increasingly employing women in more operational roles.

Terrorism is, "The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political".⁵ Islamic terrorism falls under this definition, with the specific goal of furthering Islamic ideologies and, in some cases, pursuing an Islamic caliphate.

Terrorism is one of the top three global threats to US national security according to the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community released by the Director of National Intelligence in February 2018. Terrorism has been one of the top concerns included in this annual report for over a decade and will continue to be as the threat of global terrorism evolves.

³ "ISIS Women Suicide Bombers"

⁴ Rebecca S. Cruise, "Enough with the Stereotypes: Representations of Women in Terrorist Organizations*," *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2016): 33–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12250>.

⁵ "Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms," *U.S. Department of Defense*, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=750658>.

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The threat of Islamic terrorism is derived largely from the Sunni branch of Islam rather than the smaller Shia sect. Violent Sunni groups operate on the basis of defending their ideologies and view the United States and Western society as enemies in this endeavor. Sunni violent extremist groups are geographically diverse and will exploit conflicts in the various regions they inhabit. This further threatens regional stability in areas where the US may have international interests: The Middle East, North Africa, and several countries in Asia. It also poses a threat to the safety of US citizens and military personnel abroad as well as to US allies.

The growth and strength of these global terrorist organizations poses a threat to the United States. Increased use of the internet and social media platforms for dispensing propaganda and radicalizing others contributes to the development of homegrown violent extremists (HVEs). According to the Director of National Intelligence, this is the most difficult-to-detect Sunni terrorist threat at home.⁶ As the size and scope of these groups grows, their ability to influence attacks on US soil also increases.

Women are beginning to assume more operational roles in Sunni violent extremism than in the past. The extent of this, and the specific roles they undertake, vary depending on the group, era, and type of terrorism. However, the literature and media on the topic of women in Islamic terrorism is largely limited to the observation of women in foundational roles i.e. mothers, wives, and nurturers. This is partly because of society's reluctance and inability to acknowledge women as agents of violence. Reports of Islamic terrorist organizations' actions show there has been a shift over the last few years (and potentially even longer) from these traditional foundational roles to more active roles. Despite the false

⁶ "Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms"

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narrative that women's primary roles in Islamic terrorism are as wife and mother, women now constitute at least 25% of all suicide bombers,⁷ with a 78% increase in female suicide bombers from 2016-2017.⁸

However, because of traditional ideas of women and their role and capabilities, even when they are fulfilling these more operational roles, the narrative often portrays them as unwilling victims. The research in this thesis breaks down the school of thought that there are two types of roles for women in Islamic terrorism: combatant and civilian. The framework of this research places these varying roles on a wide spectrum which can be divided into three subgroups: foundational roles, limited operational roles, and operational roles. See Appendix A for examples of these roles within al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS.

Traditional views suggest women are either uninvolved civilians victimized by Islamic terrorism or serve as pseudo-combatants fulfilling foundational roles by supporting the ideology. Further research reveals women's involvement to be much more complex and vital. There is a wide range of activities women in Islamic terrorist organizations take part in, and this is increasingly encompassing operational activities.

However, the foundational role is the most widely understood and researched aspect of women in Islamic terrorism. This describes women as mothers and wives of soldiers in Islamic terrorist groups and emphasizes their role in nurturing and propagating the groups ideologies. Because these ideologies have historically limited women's ability to participate in activities outside the home, their agency as members of these groups is diminished. On page 22 of a manifesto on the women of the Al-Khanssaa Brigade,

⁷ "Enough with the Stereotypes"

⁸ Heather Hurlburt and Jacqueline O'Neill, "We Need to Think Harder about Terrorism and Gender. ISIS Already Is," Vox, June 1, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/6/1/15722746/terrorism-gender-women-manchester-isis-counterterrorism>.

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“Women of the Islamic State,” it says, “the fundamental function for women is... in the house with her husband and children”.⁹ Women are recruited to the Islamic State (ISIS) to serve as brides.

Women in Islamic terrorism also serve limited operational roles. This includes, but is not limited to, recruitment, managing logistics, acting as political representatives, managing domestic affairs (especially within the network of women), fund raising, serving as a translator, and occasionally assuming leadership positions.

The manifesto on the AL-Khanssaa Brigade goes on to say there are “exceptional circumstances” in which women may go out to serve the community, the most important being jihad. The operational role that women in Islamic terrorism fill includes suicide bombing and espionage, among other activities. Participation by women in terrorist operations is more supported in left-wing extremist groups because the ideology is more accepting of this. It is more limited in right wing groups, such as Islamic terrorism, religion is likely to play a larger role in shaping the ideology.¹⁰

This thesis will provide a policy and evaluation analysis, addressing the questions below and the subsequent implication for US foreign policy.

⁹ “Women in the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade,” *Quilliam Foundation*, Feb 2015, accessed Oct 21, 2018.

¹⁰ New York University and Amanda Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (September 2016): 74–98, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.3.1549>.

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Research Question

- How have women's roles in violent Islamic extremist groups, specifically al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS, shifted in terms of foundational, limited operational, and fully operational?
 - Why have these shifts occurred?
 - What are the implications of this on US and global counterterrorism and DDR strategies?

Methodology

The research for this thesis was qualitative analysis. I contextually analyzed a number of secondary sources including scholarly and news articles, the majority of which focused on the foundational role of women in Islamic terrorism. Through primary documents such as newspapers, manifestos, and first-hand accounts, I reviewed the life histories of women who have been a part of Islamic terrorist groups to compare the opposing narratives of forced or coerced victim and willing agent. A comparison between the different accounts revealed a common theme around women's roles in terrorism, how their stories are told, and how this is all perceived by the public.

Discourse analysis was used to make sense of the social action that creates these gender relations and perpetuates a false dichotomy of women in terrorism. This analysis reveals the complexity behind women in Islamic terrorism because of rigid gender roles, expectations, and rights. It also leads into the policy and evaluation analysis which provided answers about the contexts for these social policies and how women's more foundational roles can be such effective tools for these groups.

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This research focuses on Islamic terrorism, both globally and on United States soil, and excludes all other types of terrorism for the purpose of identifying trends among groups with shared ideologies. The groups used in this research must be Islamic terrorist organizations recognized on an international level, as designated by the United States Department of State. The research focuses on the following Sunni groups: the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Boko Haram, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) because these groups have high numbers of female participants. Non-Islamic terrorist organizations are included in this research for comparison to draw conclusions about the influence of ideology on female participation.

Al-Qaida was established in 1988 by Usama bin Ladin. The group's goal is to unite Muslims to fight the United States and overthrow regimes it deems "non-Islamic." It also seeks to expel Westerners and non-Muslims from Muslim countries. While US counterterrorism efforts following 9/11 have weakened the organization, their influence in global terrorism remains. The group serves as a means of inspiration and imitation for individual supporters and many Sunni Islamic extremist groups around the world. The group began in Afghanistan until the Taliban was removed from power. Now the senior members are concentrated in Pakistan, but the group works in Iraq and other countries throughout the Middle East. It uses ties to local Sunni extremists to maintain a presence in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe as well.¹¹

Boko Haram (literally translated: "Western education is forbidden") was established in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, however the group was not added to the U.S. Department of State's list of terrorist organizations until 2013. The group operates in

¹¹ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *U.S. Department of State*, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/65479.pdf>.

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northeastern Nigeria, but their violence has spilled over the country's borders in recent years. The goal of this Sunni Islamist militant group is to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state with sharia criminal courts. US intelligence officials told Reuters journalist, Mark Hosenball, Boko Haram has about 4,000-6,000 "hardcore fighters",¹² but the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point claims the groups' numbers are between 7,000 and 14,000.¹³

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is a Sunni jihadist group – one inspired by al-Qaida. Its roots are in AQI, founded in 2004 by Ab Musab al-Zarqawi, but became the group known as ISIS in 2013 under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁴ ISIS calls itself a caliphate and claims religious authority over all Muslims¹⁵ with the ultimate goal of uniting the world under this caliphate. Audrey Kurth Cronin with "Foreign Affairs" says ISIS represents the post al-Qaida jihadist threat.¹⁶

Understanding the complexities of women's roles in terrorism - moving past the outdated idea that women only serve foundational roles and the school of thought that it is a polar system with women serving in one of two capacities – will allow US policy makers to address the system and its many complexities. The role of women in Islamic terrorism is essential. They continue to marry and procreate with soldiers, serving as a cornerstone

¹² "Foreign Terrorist Organizations"

¹³ "Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 21, 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wilayat-west-africa-reboots-for-the-caliphate/>.

¹⁴ Jason Hanna CNN, "Here's How ISIS Was Really Founded," CNN, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/12/middleeast/here-is-how-isis-began/index.html>.

¹⁵ 1776 Main Street Santa Monica and California 90401-3208, "The Islamic State (Terrorist Organization)," accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/topics/the-islamic-state-terrorist-organization.html>.

¹⁶ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-02-18/isis-not-terrorist-group>.

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in nurturing and furthering the extremist ideology. They serve a number of limited operational roles, using the world's lack of understanding of this to their advantage. More recently, they are serving in operational capacities in greater and greater numbers, constituting a large percentage of suicide bombers across the world in many different Islamic terrorist groups. These terrorist groups are capitalizing on the world's inability to adjust to this expansion.

The significance of this research is the impact it can have on the way the United States and our allies approach counterterrorism. It will provide a more accurate and comprehensive idea of the structure of these terrorist groups. The erroneous perception of female roles in terrorism is a weakness these organizations are currently exploiting. To fully understand how these groups function, we must understand the roles of the women.

Review of the Literature

The literature review for this research will be presented thematically, and relevant literature will also be addressed in each chapter. It will begin with literature explaining how and why women come to be involved in Islamic terrorism. This will be followed by literature confirming a shift in female roles. Literature attempting to explain *why* this shift has and is occurring will then be presented. There is a gap in literature on this topic that does not address the need for a gender-based approach in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reimpregnation (DDR) efforts related to Islamic extremist groups. The literature confirms the shift addressed in this thesis but does not offer a comprehensive framework. The contribution of this thesis is the identification of the three main functions of women in Sunni extremist groups. It will address the

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complexities of women's roles and provide analysis that challenges the traditional binary theme of women in extremist groups.

Each chapter will include an analysis that addresses the implications of the research and contributes to filling this gap in intelligence. Although most DDR programs do incorporate a gender-based approach, they often do not directly address the specific problems posed by women in these groups or women's specific needs. The research in "Women and Islamic-State Terrorism: An Assessment of How Gender Perspectives Are Integrated in Countering Violent Extremism Policy and Practices" by Sofia Patel and Jacqueline Westermann suggests there is a need for more empirical research to develop a "holistic" understanding of women in terrorism. The paper focuses on Western women's involvement with ISIS, addressing their *reasons* for joining. An approach that not only looks at the members as women, but for their role within the group, will allow for greater understanding when designing and implementing these DDR strategies.

Robin Arnett, a master's student in International and Public Affairs, authored an article titled, "Women in Conflict" which addresses common DDR practices and their need for a more complete picture of female participation in conflict. Like Patel and Westermann, she confirms the necessity of understanding not only the number of women involved, but also why they join and the roles they fill. Her research places emphasis on women's transitions back into normal society. On page 3 she states, "for women who experience empowerment as active combatants, being forced to fit back into highly oppressive societies can be extremely arduous".¹⁷ She addresses the importance of securing jobs for

¹⁷ Robin Arnett, "Women in Conflict," *Columbia Social Work Review*, no. 2015 (April 17, 2019), https://cswr.columbia.edu/article/women-in-conflict?article=women-in-conflict&post_type=article&name=women-in-conflict.

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women that allow them to utilize their skills and support themselves and their families. The reintegration phase of DDR often includes health care, counseling, educational and vocational training, and assistance with reconciliation. Arnett stresses that this phase, especially, must be unique for women and for the society they are being reintegrated into.¹⁸ This is an extremely important consideration when discussing Islamic extremism because the societies of ex-combatants are often patriarchal and adhere to very strict gender roles and norms.

There are two categories of women in Islamic terrorist organizations: those who are born and raised within the group and those who join on their own as an adult. There are multiple theories as to why women choose to join, and all may be true. A report by the Soufan Center, “Beyond the Caliphate”, suggests that traditional reasons women are joining ISIS are the perceived possibility of self-betterment and freedom from discrimination and injustice. Another reason is the belief that they will find an identity in a globalized world or the opportunity to find a purpose and belonging. It is possible these are more compelling reasons for women than men. Yet, another possibility is the lure of excitement that violence and fighting offer.

Human Rights Watch interviewed over 30 individuals who were abducted or witnessed abductions by Boko Haram. The first-hand accounts of these included in the report “Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp” mention physical and psychological abuse for not converting to Islam, forced labor and participation in military operations, forced marriage to captors, and being made to perform household chores. These experiences fall

¹⁸ “Women in Conflict”

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under the narrative of passive victims, although other accounts reveal contrasting stories of women as active participants.

In her commentary, “Nigeria’s Female Suicide Bombers: A Show of Strength,” Elizabeth Pearson argues that Boko Haram’s abduction of women as forced operatives may be a sign of ambition rather than weakness. Rather than a sign of depleted numbers of fighting males, the employment of women through force and abduction is motivated by the benefits of diversion and propaganda. In this commentary, Pearson argues that younger women may be coerced or forced into these roles, but the older female bombers may have chosen to act in support of Boko Haram’s aims. This difference is significant to understanding women’s roles and the reasons they assume them.

An article by Farouk Chothia suggests that female Boko Haram suicide bombers are more likely to be the children of members rather than abducted school girls as the media and many people in Nigeria fear. She says, “Boko Haram women have graduated from being helpers who cook and clean to being bombers”.¹⁹ This supports the theory that a shift has occurred in the role these women play. It is important to know whether this shift to the employment of women in these roles is a sign of desperation by Boko Haram. Chothia claims the “Female Wing” serves two purposes: spying and recruiting potential wives for the men on the front line.

Research suggests the roles of women are even more complex than this, with a number of different roles on a spectrum from foundational to operational. Amanda Spencer details these many roles in her article, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State.” She acknowledges women’s roles of serving as a suitable wife

¹⁹ Farouk Chothia, “Boko Haram Crisis: Nigeria’s Female Bombers Strike,” August 6, 2014, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28657085>.

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to ISIS soldiers and birthing the next generation, but she goes on to outline dozens of other capacities in which women serve. Although the research shows women do not often assume leadership positions, they fill many limited operational roles including: acting as political representatives, fund raising, translating, recruiting, managing domestic affairs and logistics. The research also states it is not uncommon for them to assume operational roles including espionage and terror operations. This article describes the most extensive training for women that I have found. Spencer states that women in ISIS are sent to a safehouse in Syria that can be likened to a “Jihad finishing school,” called Maqar. Here, women receive training in first aid, social media marketing and computer programming, Islamic law, firearm and explosive training, and domestic affairs.

The following three chapters will examine women’s roles in al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and ISIS, categorizing them into three tiers: foundational, limited operational, and operational. The final chapter will address the implications of this research on US and global CVE and DDR strategies, analyzing current approaches and offering prospective solutions to fill gaps that have developed as these roles have evolved.

Chapter 2

Foundational Roles

“Violence is like a weed – it does not die even in the greatest drought.”
-Simon Wiesenthal

History

This chapter will dive into the history of women in an array of violent terrorism, describing their roles in various terrorist organizations throughout the past few decades. Comparisons will be drawn between religious and secular groups to better understand why women assume the roles they do within certain groups. There will then be an in-depth description of the foundational roles women serve in Islamic terrorist groups and the culture that facilitates it.

Women’s involvement in global Islamic terrorism underwent a significant shift in the 1970’s and 1980’s as it became more acceptable for women to participate outside of the home. Thirty-four percent of international terrorist attacks since 1985 have been carried out by women.²⁰ Women’s involvement in terrorism began with secular groups such as the FARC in Colombia, the Shining Path in Peru, and the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Secular groups remain the most prominent employers of females today. However, in the past few years, religious groups have begun to increase their number of women and the capacities in which they serve as well. Nationalist and left-wing groups are more likely to employ women because their ideology is more likely to support and accept women in nontraditional roles.

²⁰ Jessica Davis, “Gendered Terrorism : Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 2 (April 1, 2008): 22–38, <https://doi.org/10.3172/MIN.2.1.22>.

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However, as extremist and militant groups progress globally, conservative and traditional groups are being driven to include women – the benefits of female involvement supersede traditional ideologies. For example, women are better able to evade security forces and the media attention they receive is more powerful than that of their male counterparts. They also have a keen ability as recruiters of both men and women. The following section will discuss the history of women in secular terrorist groups and their more recent involvement in religious terrorism, specifically violent Sunni extremism.

Throughout history women have performed more operational roles in secular groups as opposed to religious groups. This stems from ideologies that limit women's roles as leaders and perpetrators of violence. While religious groups, like the violent Sunni extremist organizations included in this paper, have begun to employ women in more operational roles in the past few years, women have acted as combatants in secular extremist groups for decades.

To assess the evolution of women in religious extremist groups, particularly Sunni Islamic groups, it is important to understand women's roles in non-religious groups for comparison. Because of stringent limitations placed on women in religious extremist groups, their path to limited and fully operational roles has been decades, if not centuries, slower. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a guerilla movement involved in the continuing Colombian armed conflict from 1964 to 2017, employed women in a variety of operational roles. The group was formed as a Marxist-Leninist force composed of peasants promoting agrarian and anti-imperialism politics. Women were involved in this group from the beginning, serving on the front lines and comprising up to

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40% of the guerilla army. In 1985 there was a shift away from the foundational/supportive roles and they began to perform intelligence gathering and serve as leaders of units.²¹

FARC offered women a certain degree of autonomy that women in these rural areas would not otherwise have been afforded. This, along with social changes and the dissolution of the family structure, were driving factors behind women's participation in this group; the group's ideology played a role in their ability to do so. Having an extensive female involvement allowed the organization to be very self-contained, a cornerstone of the FARC's organizational blueprint. Although women enjoyed the autonomy that FARC gave them, they were expected to serve the military by providing "sexual services." FARC considered its "feminization" to be a political advantage.²²

Another Latin American group to employ a large number of women in the 70's and 80's was the Shining Path in Peru. Up to 40% of members were women and they participated at nearly every level – militants, commanders, and top party leaders. The Shining Path used the idea of the "emancipation of women" to recruit females. This group was closely tied to the Popular Feminist Movement (MFP) which was led by high profile Shining Path members.²³

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a militant organization in Sri Lanka from its founding in 1976 until its defeat in 2009. During this time, it waged a secessionist nationalist insurgency, carrying out militant attacks, that led to the Sri Lankan Civil War in 1983. As of 2000, approximately 50% of LTTE members were women. These

²¹ "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism: Vol 26, No 3," accessed February 8, 2019,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100390211419?journalCode=uter20>.

²² "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism"

²³ "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism"

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women receive equivalent training and experience to the men and play a large role in the structure of the organization. Similar to the autonomy women joining FARC sought, liberation and freedom were primary motivations for those who joined the LTTE. Women were favored as suicide bombers because of their ability to evade security forces. They were encouraged by the group and their society to participate because of “sociocultural norms” and the idealization of sacrifice. Women who were socially prohibited from marriage and childbearing (i.e. rape victims) were encouraged to become suicide bombers as a path to redemption. Women have also been involved in terrorism in South Asia among Sikh militants, the Kashmir conflict between Indian and Pakistan, and others.²⁴

Ideology plays a strong role in the structure of terrorist organizations. It dictates the objectives, operational styles, hierarchical structure, those who join and their roles. This is why women’s roles differ between terrorist organizations and why the shift from foundational to more operational roles has happened at different paces throughout different points in history.

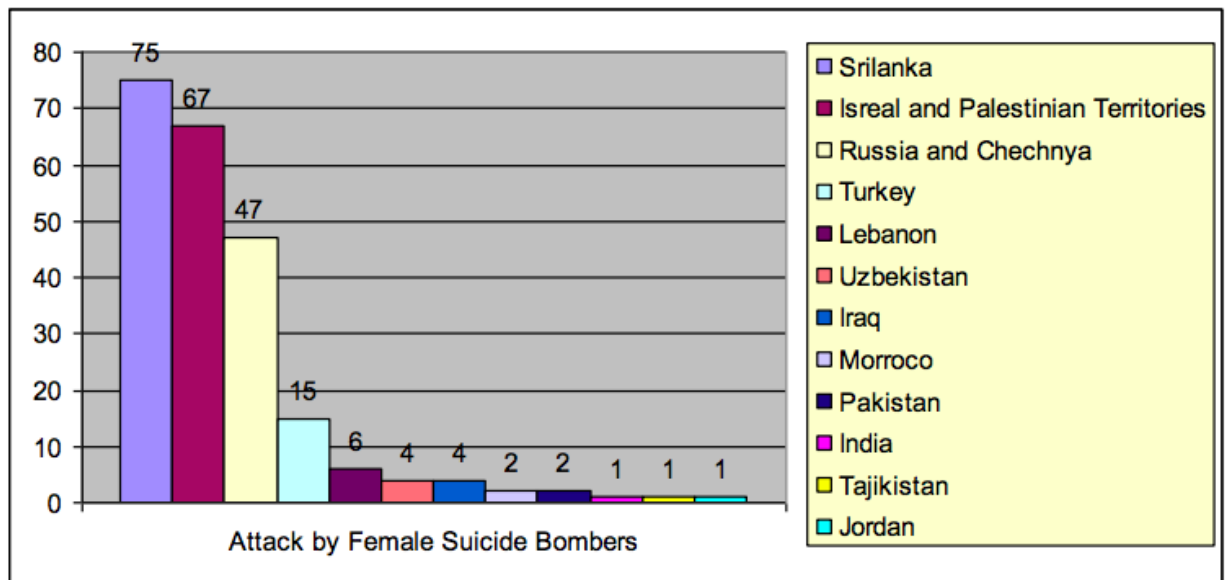
Sana Mekhaidali was the first female suicide bomber, killing five Lebanese soldiers in 1985. She belonged to the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). Other groups such as the LTTE began employing female suicide bombers following this attack. In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, more groups began employing women in more operational roles, especially as suicide bombers because of their success and effectiveness. Even religious groups, once hesitant to use women on the frontlines, began using them for

²⁴ “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism”

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suicide bombings. For geographical reference, Figure 1 below depicts the number of suicide bombings carried out by women in various countries between 1985 and 2006.²⁵

Figure 1: Female Suicide Bombings by Country, 1985-2006



Source: Schweitzer, Y. (2006).

Because religious groups traditionally employed women in only foundational/supportive roles from their beginning stages until the last two or three decades, the shift to women in more operational roles is more prominent and noteworthy. While terrorist organizations in Latin America and Europe had large female involvement throughout the ranks as early as the 70's and 80's, with the incorporation of female suicide bombers beginning in the mid-late 80's, it wasn't until 2002 that Palestinian Islamic extremist groups began to use female suicide bombers.

This shift represents a change in ideology for these Islamic groups, but a change brought about by strategic necessity. The benefits of female operatives combined with the

²⁵ Schweitzer, Y. (2006a) Introduction. In Y Schweitzer (Ed.), *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* (pp. 1-12). Tel Aviv: The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies.

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unconventional wars these groups are waging make it almost impossible for the opportunity to be overlooked.

Foundational Roles

Muslim scholar, Recep Dogan, asserts that Islamic extremism dates back to the 7th century, with groups in Muslim majority areas interpreting the Quran in extreme ways to justify their violent actions. Modern-day terrorism has its origins in the 1960's and 1970's when anti-Western movements began to plague the Arab and Islamic world.²⁶ Beginning in these initial stages, women were involved in these Islamic extremist organizations. A core aspect of these groups' ideologies is adherence to Sharia law. Most extremist groups follow strict interpretations of Shariah law which limits women to the foundational roles, serving in the home as wives and mothers.

Women from all over the world are recruited into Islamic terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and the Islamic State to serve as brides. Their primary responsibility is to rear children, particularly sons, who will grow up to be soldiers. The women are responsible for raising these children, nurturing the family, and educating them in Islamic ideology. They maintain the home for their husbands, cooking and cleaning. Every ISIS brigade is supposed to have a team of cooks and kitchen staff to prepare meals for the soldiers, and women are permitted to participate in this.²⁷

²⁶ Recep Dogan, *Terrorism and Violence in Islamic History and Theological Responses to the Arguments of Terrorists* (New York: Nova Science, 2018).

²⁷ "The Archivist: Stories of the Mujahideen: Women of the Islamic State," accessed April 17, 2019, <https://jihadology.net/2016/10/17/the-archivist-stories-of-the-mujahideen-women-of-the-islamic-state/>.

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Based on reports from individuals who have fled from these groups, women join Islamic extremist organizations motivated by one of two reasons: voluntarily or compulsorily.²⁸ Those who join by compulsion are forced into marriages with soldiers, and even those who join voluntarily are often immediately arranged to marry a male within the organization. Nigeria, home of the terrorist organization Boko Haram, has some of the world's highest rates of early marriage, with 48% of girls married by age 14.²⁹ The women forced into these marriages do not seek to be operatives in a terrorist sect – they are forced into these marriages by any number of reasons, beginning their lifetime of fulfilling these necessary foundational roles.

Religious extremist groups such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State embrace strict rules for women's behavior. Although there has been an increase in female involvement in jihad over the past 20 years, the groups officially maintain the belief that women should follow Shariah law, which limits their freedoms in many ways, including the ability to participate in jihad. To understand female terrorist's limited roles within terrorist organizations, it is necessary to understand the origin and means for enforcing these limitations.

Sharia law is the official Islamic law set out in the Quran and based on *sunna*, the ways of the Prophet Muhammad. It is an incredibly broad legal system that regulates public and private behavior and beliefs.³⁰ See Figure 2 below for information on regional support

²⁸ "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Center* (blog), accessed February 7, 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.

²⁹ Jacqueline Bhabha, "The Nigerian Schoolgirls Near You | by Jacqueline Bhabha," Project Syndicate, June 6, 2014, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/jacqueline-bhabha-exposes-the-world-s-double-standard-when-it-come-to-protecting-nigerian-girls>.

³⁰ "SHARIA LAW — LIST OF KEY RULES — What Is Sharia Law?," accessed April 17, 2019, <http://www.billionbibles.org/sharia/sharia-law.html>.

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for Sharia law. Traditional Sharia law prohibits women from participating in jihad, among many other things. Although Sharia law cannot be altered, it can be interpreted by an ‘alim (an Islamic religious scholar). Despite an increase in female jihadist operatives, the groups’ leadership maintain the beliefs of Sharia law as it pertains to women.

According to research by the Pew Research Center, there is higher support for Sharia law in countries with greater instances of Sunni violence, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. This illustrates a correlation between Sharia law and violent extremism which is important to understand as Sharia law greatly shapes the structure of these groups and the behavior of those within.³¹

In 2008, Ayman Zawahiri, al-Qaida’s second in command at the time, issued a statement on female suicide bombers. Zawahiri said, “al-Qaida has no women, but the women of the mujahideen do their heroic part in taking care of their homes and sons in the roughness of the immigration, movement, unity, and expecting the Crusader strikes”.³² He claims it is difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to carry out physical jihad because Sharia law states she must have a Mahram (a male Muslim relative) escort her in “her comings and goings”.³³

The ISIS Manifesto states that “only under exceptional circumstances” should a woman pursue things outside of the home. This can include jihad if it is declared by religious leaders, such as an ‘alim, or if a fatwah is declared calling them to participate. Although Sharia law excludes women from participating in jihadist operations and limits

³¹ “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World | Pew Research Center,” accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

³² “The Women of Jihad,” accessed April 8, 2019, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/225-the-women-of-jihad>.

³³ “The Women of Jihad”

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their mobility outside of the home through means such as requiring a Mahram, there is a category of women who participate in limited operations roles.

This chapter provided a background of women in terrorism and looked specifically at violent Islamic extremist groups and their employment of women. While their foundational roles are necessary for these groups' survival and success, women are beginning to assume more active roles. The shift for women in Islamic terrorism is the beginning of a greater change for the entire structure of these groups. The shift in these roles will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Limited Operational Roles

“All warfare is based on deception.”

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the limited operational roles of women in Islamic terrorism and what they entail specifically. Research on women in ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Qaida will be included for this analysis. Women’s participation in limited operational roles within the realm of Islamic terrorism has become prominent only in the past few decades. This chapter will address why this shift from foundational to limited operational roles has occurred and how it impacts the United States’ ability to counter these groups.’ efforts

“Limited operational” is a term used to describe those roles which are not necessarily combative, yet still essential to any operation. These duties may oftentimes not require the woman to leave the house. Recruitment and proliferation of propaganda are common limited operational activities which can be conducted from a computer within the home. In the Islamic State, women who step outside of their foundational roles are often charged with maintaining order within the group’s network of women. They may manage logistics, act as political representatives, raise funds, recruit new members, or serve as translators (if they have received education to learn another language). While it is still rare,

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if ever, that women serve as leaders in Islamic terrorist organizations, evidence shows they are becoming more involved in decision making processes.³⁴

In al-Qaida, the responsibilities of women were traditionally limited to providing moral and logistical support. The moral support aspect encompasses the foundational roles, while the logistics support encompasses the limited operational roles. Female involvement in these limited operational roles predominantly takes the form of recruiter, organizer, proselytizer, teacher, translator, and fund-raiser.³⁵ A woman is more likely to assume these nontraditional roles if she is widowed or unmarried because she is unable to undertake foundational roles within the home. In this case, a woman may be assigned a low-level professional job supporting the caliphate. It is also likely she may be assigned to the all-female security force, the Al-Khansaa Brigade, which is tasked with enforcing Islamic morality. Some of these women receive weapons training and are armed with firearms before being sent into the streets to patrol public morality of women. This unit now oversees detention centers housing thousands of foreign hostages. Although the Al-Khansaa Brigade operates autonomously as an all-female unit, they hold very little power within the structure of the Islamic State; they cannot challenge any policies or practices.³⁶ Women who move beyond the foundational roles are limited in what they may do.

While the Al-Khansaa Brigade's manifesto on women states the fundamental function for women is in the home with her husband and children, the very existence of the all-female brigade contradicts this notion. Despite the public statement that women should

³⁴ "Enough with the Stereotypes"

³⁵ New York University and Amanda Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (September 2016): 74–98, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.3.1549>.

³⁶ "The Hidden Face of Terrorism"

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serve in the home and only serve the community under certain circumstances, the formation of the Al-Khansaa Brigade and other all-female military units demonstrates that women are, in fact, taking on limited operational roles. Their enforcement of Islamic State laws makes them an active extension of the state.

Limited Operational Roles

These limitations aim to prohibit women from essentially acting as soldiers. They are permitted to serve in roles more vital to operations without directly participating in jihad. They perform duties outside of the home and are key players in the success of certain operations, without holding any power or leadership within the groups. Still, the limited operational roles they perform contribute to the strength and success of these groups today.

One of the greatest roles women in Islamic terrorism serve today is that of recruiter. Through hours spent engaging online, these women can serve a large role in the recruitment of other women to their organization. This does not require them to leave the house or have any formal education or training. While caring for the home, they can devote large amounts of time to online discussions and propaganda every day.

One female recruiter by the name of Umm Ubaydah has been active on multiple online platforms as an ISIS propagandist. Her twitter account (@Al_Khanssaa) has been suspended but she was previously very active. On this account she once said, “theres [sic] not a single women fightin [sic] in IS. The womens [sic] place is in her house looking after her kids and fulfilling her duty to her husband”.³⁷ Although Ubaydah supports the notion of foundational roles for women, she contributes to the Islamic State through her internet

³⁷ “Meet the Female Recruiters of ISIS,” *Intelligencer*, accessed February 16, 2019, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/09/meet-the-female-recruiters-of-isis.html>.

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activism in a major way. She answers questions on sites like Kik, posts blogs on Tumblr, and invites individuals to have more personal and private conversations with her online. She encourages hijra (pilgrimage to Mecca), and posts positive images of her life online, often spending time with her fellow ISIS members, Umm Layth (real name: Asqa Mahmood) and Umm Haritha (Twitter handle: @bintladden). Ubaydah is critical online of women who do not live in accordance with the Quran. She discourages Western lifestyles and promotes extremism and ISIS propaganda.

Recruiters convince women to join by romanticizing life, as Umm Abaydah does through her posts online. Isolated, weak, and/or vulnerable women are targeted with this propaganda. They are preached to and further isolated from friends and family. Recruiters will sell them a romanticized version of life in the Islamic State, concealing the truth that ISIS is among the world's worst organizations for violence against women.

These recruiters send a message promising empowerment for those who join. The women seek deliverance, participation, and piety. Some women are pulled to join by the idea that they will have a better life, reserving oppressions they face. Recruiters identify what an individual wants and promises they will receive it by joining. According to "A Course in the Art of Recruitment" by Abu 'Amr al-Qa'idi, there are five stages to the recruitment process: 1, Acquaintance and Selection; 2, Building a Relationship; 3, Faith Awakening; 4, Implanting Jihadist Concepts; 5, Formation of a Cell.³⁸

An article posted in the New York Times details the recruitment of a woman in rural Washington state by a male member of the Islamic State. The process perfectly followed the guidelines set out in "A Course in the Art of Recruitment." He spent several

³⁸ "The Hidden Face of Terrorism"

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months developing a relationship with her and determining her suitability. He built a relationship with her, sending her gifts including clothing, chocolate, and religious materials. He then began to teach her about Islam and sent her prayer mats and head scarves. Even after an intervention by her family, the young woman still continues to speak online with the ISIS member.³⁹

In addition to the ISIS female wing, the Al-Khansaa Brigade, Boko Haram now has a female wing as well according to the Nigerian military. In 2014 three women belonging to this group were arrested for recruiting. The military says these women belonged to an intelligence cell.⁴⁰

Analysis

Employing women in more active roles is beneficial to these extremist groups for several reasons. Women are better able to deceive security forces, as people are less suspicious of them and they are able to conceal weapons and explosives under their conservative clothing. Employing women in these limited operational roles is also beneficial to these groups because it allows for more men to act as soldiers. Many of these limited operational roles can be completed within the home, so women may perform these duties while completing housework and caring for children.

Groups are beginning to allow women to fill these roles because the benefits are so great. Women make exceptional recruiters of fellow women because of their ability to appeal to their interests and desires and pursued them with their own stories (although often

³⁹ "ISIS and the Lonely Young American - The New York Times," accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html>.

⁴⁰ "Nigeria Arrests 'Boko Haram Women,'" July 4, 2014, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28168003>.

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exaggerated). The female recruiters build relationships with Western women through online platforms and social media, sharing their stories of love, duty, and purpose. This is especially true for ISIS recruits and is an influential driving force behind the American and European women who leave their homes to join the group. Hearing the stories of women who have joined the group and now have a successful family with a husband and children all being raised under and serving the caliphate together can be very appealing to vulnerable women looking for a place to belong. Of those who have left Europe to join ISIS, 20% are female. Recruiters create messages that specifically target women, often more complex than the promise of becoming a jihadi bride.⁴¹ Women are also adept at passing along information, especially in the Islamic world. They do not raise suspicion and are far less likely to be stopped or searched because of the culture and its emphasis on modesty.

However, despite these benefits, employing women in these roles deviates from the groups' traditional ideologies, which often requires approval from religious leaders. For example, 'Abdullah 'Azzam released a fatwah in the 1980's stating that jihad was a "fard 'ayn" (personal duty) for all Muslims, men and women.⁴² Women are willing, if not eager, to fill these roles because many join the groups on their volition, seeking empowerment and a chance to break away from Muslim women's traditional lifestyle of servitude.⁴³ They join looking for greater freedom and purpose.

⁴¹ Heather Hurlburt and Jacqueline O'Neill, "We Need to Think Harder about Terrorism and Gender. ISIS Already Is," Vox, June 1, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/6/1/15722746/terrorism-gender-women-manchester-isis-counterterrorism>.

⁴² "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 16, 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/>.

⁴³ "Beyond the Caliphate"

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As Chapter 2 detailed, women are prohibited by Sharia law from participating in a myriad of activities including leaving the home except under specific circumstances. However, replacing men in these roles with women allows for greater numbers of soldiers on the frontlines while also contributing to recruitment numbers of new members.

This chapter explored the various limited operational roles of women in Islamic terrorism including recruiter, translator, funds raiser, logistical support, etc. The employment of women in these roles is a shift from the foundational roles described in Chapter 1 without deviating too far from their ideological practices centered around Sharia law. The shift is driven by the benefits the groups experience by allowing women to take on more roles within the organization. Chapter 4 will examine women's shift into operational roles within Islamic terrorist organizations.

Chapter 4

Operational Roles

“Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon itself.”
-Lau Tzu

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the shift to operational roles for women in Islamic terrorism. In the past 2 decades there has been a dramatic increase in female operatives in Islamic extremist groups. The Islamic State, Boko Haram, and al-Qaida have all used female operatives in recent years, though to varying degrees. The groups’ ideologies differ slightly, and this affects their approach to women’s roles. Chapter 4 will focus on women in operational roles and the impact it has on the structure and culture of these groups.

Within these terrorist organizations and militant groups, operational roles are the most active and visible roles to the public and the global community via media reporting. Operatives receive the most news coverage as they have the highest level of involvement with any attacks. As Chapter 2 covered, women are specifically forbidden from participation in jihad except under exceptional circumstances. As such, they have remained in foundational and sometimes limited operational roles for the most part. Recently, however, their participation in operational roles (particularly suicide bombings) has increased significantly.

Operational roles women have recently begun to fill include committing suicide bombings, conducting espionage, acting as militants, and participating in other terrorist operations. Female participation in these acts varies between groups, and it is far less

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common among Islamic organizations, though it is becoming more common. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Counterterrorism Center says Sana'a Mehadli of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) may have been the first female suicide bomber in 1985.⁴⁴ Since 1985, 34% of global terrorist attacks have been carried out by women. Today, more than 30% of international terrorists are thought to be female. Women constitute 25% of all suicide attacks globally, while half of all suicide attacks since 2002 in Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Chechnya were carried out by women.⁴⁵

One of the most famous female suicide bombers in history is Wafa Idris, an advocate for the liberation of Palestine.⁴⁶ In 2002, Idris detonated a bomb in Jerusalem, killing herself and an Israeli man and wounding others.⁴⁷ At the time, this unusual act by a woman appeared to be a sign of desperation by the Palestinians. Two years later, in 2004, religious leaders in the area declared that it is permissible for women to participate in these types of activities and the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP) began using more women for suicide attacks.⁴⁸ Historically, Palestinian territories have allowed for more female movement and liberation, but this concept of female operatives has spread throughout the world of Islamic terrorism.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ "NCTC Did You Know the First Suicide Bombing May Have Occurred in 1881.Pdf," accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.fbiic.gov/public/2008/sept/NCTC%20Did%20you%20know%20the%20first%20suicide%20bombing%20may%20have%20occurred%20in%201881.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Jessica Davis, "Gendered Terrorism : Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 2 (April 1, 2008): 22–38, <https://doi.org/10.3172/MIN.2.1.22>.

⁴⁶ "Enough with the Stereotypes"

⁴⁷ "Arab Woman's Path to Unlikely 'Martyrdom' - The New York Times," accessed February 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/31/world/arab-woman-s-path-to-unlikely-martyrdom.html>.

⁴⁸ "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism: Vol 26, No 3," accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100390211419?journalCode=uter20>.

⁴⁹ "Enough with the Stereotypes"

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It is important to note the distinction between voluntary and coerced operatives, especially when discussing female operatives. The employment of female recruiters has been very successful for these organizations in recruiting more women. Most women who join are married to soldiers and fulfill foundational roles in their home. However, some single women who join take on operational roles. Common thinking is that the majority of women in terrorist organizations are participating against their will, however it is likely women join for many of the same reasons as men.

A report on the threat of foreign fighters by the Soufan Center says, “terrorism is as much emotional as it is ideological”.⁵⁰ There are many factors that drive women to Islamic terrorism (whether it is disillusioned or not): the potential for freedom from discrimination and injustice, a sense of identity in a world becoming more globalized, a sense of belonging, and belief in the cause. Why a woman joins can determine what type of role she assumes within the organization.

Background

Sharia law has been strictly interpreted as barring women from engaging in jihad, however a notion commonly accepted (to varying degrees) is women’s ability to participate in *defensive* jihad – combat operations geared towards protecting the dar-al-Islam (Muslim lands).⁵¹ As Al-Qaida and ISIS’s control and strength in certain regions has ebbed and flowed, so too has their interpretation on women’s role in jihad. In 2005, AQI leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi released an audio message in which he specifically discussed the role

⁵⁰ “Beyond the Caliphate”

⁵¹ “Institute for Global Change,” Institute for Global Change, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://institute.global/>.

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of women in jihad. At the time, a liberal interpretation of Sharia law allowed for female participation in jihad if it was defensive. Because of pressure Sunni Muslims were facing with the US occupation in Iraq, Zarqawi acknowledged a need for proactive roles. In the months and years following this speech, female bombers came to play an instrumental role in Iraqi insurgencies. In September 2005, AQI conducted its first suicide bombing by a mujahidat (an attack on a US military base in Iraq); the attack was alluded to in Zarqawi's speech. Zarqawi viewed female fighters as serving two purposes: tactically, as a means of attacking the enemy, and strategically, as a way to shame more men into joining the fight.⁵²

Following this attack, AQI spokesman, Abu Maysarah al'Iraqi, declared the mujahidat a "noble sister," stating she was "acting heroically in the name of her religion".⁵³ The rate of female suicide bombings increased in 2007 and peaked in 2008 as a result of this pressure. However, in 2014 ISIS declared itself a caliphate and was no longer facing a shortage of soldiers. Thus, women's role in operations decreased. Now that the organization has lost territory with the reclamation of Raqqa and Mosul and shifted from an offensive to a more defensive position, the group has been forced to revisit its stance on female combatants.⁵⁴

The Zawra' Foundation, a female-orientated propaganda outlet utilized by ISIS, published an article titled "Valuable Advice and Important Analysis on the Rules for Women's Participation in Jihad" in August 2015. This document lays out four conditions under which it is permissible for women to engage in jihad. These conditions include if her

⁵² "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 16, 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/>.

⁵³ "The Mujahidat Dilemma"

⁵⁴ "The Mujahidat Dilemma"

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home is raided and she must act defensively, if she is in a public place attacked by kuffar (infidels) she may detonate a suicide belt, if she is in a solitary place and ordered by the emir to do so, and if the emir has permitted her to participate in martyrdom operations for the public good.⁵⁵ This document included ideas on female combatants as the al-Khanssaa Brigade's manifesto mentioned earlier, however it included a slightly more lenient list of permissible reasons for women to participate in jihad. It also stated women should prepare for fighting just in case by participating in weapons and explosives training.

In July 2017 an ISIS propaganda magazine, "Rumiyah", noted that the time had come for female followers to take their support for the caliphate to the next stage. The article stated, "rise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad." Following the release of this article, Naba, the official newspaper of ISIS, stated that women may participate in combative jihad "if the enemy enters the abode".⁵⁶ This permission of combative jihad is significant because of the dual meaning of the term used for abode: bayt. In Arabic, al-bayt can mean "the home" but the term can also be used synonymously with al-dar which means "the land." The statement released by Naba marks a shift from permitting women to engage in only defensive jihad to their participation in combative or offensive jihad as well. Naba released another article in October 2017 stating that women had an *obligation* to engage in jihad, giving examples of women who fought at the time of the Prophet Muhammad to justify this call to action.

⁵⁵ "The Mujahidat Dilemma"

⁵⁶ "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention," Institute for Global Change, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://institute.global/>.

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The most significant piece of ISIS propaganda surrounding the issue of female combatants was released in January 2018. It was a video titled “Inside the Khilafah” released by the ISIS controlled al-Hayat Media Centre. The video depicted fighters wearing women’s garb in Eastern Syria and the voice over said, “women journeying to their Lord with the garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for their religion.”

Operational Roles

Suicide attacks are a signature of Islamic terrorism. It garners major media attention which benefits the perpetrating group and is an easy way to cause major harm and damage. Female suicide bombers receive much more media coverage than their male counterparts, which is a driving factor behind the use of women in this role. The three Islamic terrorist organizations used in this paper, al-Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram, each approach female suicide bombers lightly differently.

Boko Haram, which notoriously abducts women in Nigeria, had its first incident of a female suicide bomber in 2014. The group is increasingly using women in suicide attacks on soft targets, i.e. non-secured locations such as markets, schools, etc.⁵⁷ In Nigeria, women as young as 10 have been seen wearing bombs. There is fear that the young school girls who Boko Haram abducts are being forced into conducting suicide attacks. However, Bawa Abdullahi Wase, a Nigerian-based security analyst, says most female suicide bombers are the offspring of Boko Haram members.⁵⁸ The Council on Foreign Relations says, “according to at least one credible source in northeastern Nigeria, most women in

⁵⁷ “Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-and-boko-haram-insurgency>.

⁵⁸ “Nigeria Arrests ‘Boko Haram Women,’” July 4, 2014, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28168003>.

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Boko Haram are acting voluntarily,” claiming they become suicide bombers to seek revenge for the death of a loved one.⁵⁹

Widowed women of deceased Boko Haram soldiers are ineligible for marriage again and feel little prospect for the possibility of returning to a normal life. This, coupled with the pain and anger of losing their husbands, may be a force which drives them to martyrdom. The gender-based violence they face by Nigerian security forces also pushes them to take on these roles within the group.

The female wing of Boko Haram previously mentioned serves two main purposes: espionage and recruitment. The main goal of their recruitment efforts is securing wives for the men on the frontlines. These wives will likely serve in foundational roles unless their husbands die and they are without sons, in which case they may turn to martyrdom.

Although Boko Haram has been more willing to expand the roles of women, as a very religious and traditional group, al-Qaida, has been less ready to employ women in operational roles. However, we are now seeing an increase. Religious leaders are having to weigh the benefits of female involvement against the group’s traditional religious ideologies.

In addition to performing suicide attacks, women are more commonly being use for “clandestine passing of information”.⁶⁰ They are also used to lure men, particularly security personnel, into dangerous situations. Both of these acts are classified as espionage in this paper. Women are exceptionally good at conducting espionage because they arouse less suspicion and are therefore able to move more easily in civilian areas. Although women have taken on more operational roles in Islamic terrorism over the past few decades, the

⁵⁹ “Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency”

⁶⁰ “Enough with the Stereotypes”

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world is reluctant to acknowledge them as terrorist operatives, and terrorist organizations use this to their advantage.

Analysis

The common narrative given to females in terrorism is that of an ignorant or coerced/forced woman acting unwillingly. Because of this, western society and the Islamic world are reluctant to acknowledge women's agency within terrorism. Terrorist organizations use this to conduct attacks that they would otherwise not be able to. For example, the ISIS attack mentioned in the opening of this thesis utilized the inconspicuousness of two women to execute a suicide attack in an area heavily controlled by opposition forces. The security forces were attempting to evacuate all women and children while remaining on the lookout for male ISIS soldiers. Women are able to move through security forces inconspicuously, only to cause great damage. They can commit espionage more easily because they do not alert suspicion. They are also effective smugglers, able to discretely move information, weapons, etc.

Female operatives also garner more media attention which violent Islamic extremist groups capitalize on. The main goal of suicide bombings is usually attention, and attacks by females are sensationalized. Media spends more time talking about attacks by females than by males, giving the incident and the group responsible more media attention and success. The reason terrorist groups use such gruesome violence in their attacks is to gain notoriety.

Attacks by women can also make the target, often government, appear weaker and more vulnerable. Especially in Islamic society, the notion of a woman causing damage and

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destruction comes as more of a shock and carries more weight. People still do not expect women to have the capability or will to commit these acts, so when they do it makes the target question their stability and strength more so than if a man had been responsible.

While some research suggests women are still not holding leadership positions despite becoming more involved in operations and decision-making processes, all-female units such as the Al-Khansaa Brigade are evidence that women are assuming leadership roles and acting independently within these organizations. Boko Haram also has female-only wings that operate autonomously as a military unit.

This chapter analyzed the operational roles women are assuming within Islamic extremist organizations and why there has been a shift in the culture of these groups to allow this. Although each group is unique in its structure and culture, it is becoming more common for al-Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram to employ women as operatives. There are undeniable benefits to their operations that make female combatants a necessity. Chapter 5 will discuss the impact of the shift in women's roles within Islamic terrorism on US national security and provide assessments for improving our global counterterrorism efforts.

Chapter 5

Policy Analysis

“Violence is like a weed – it does not die even in the greatest drought.”
-Simon Wiesenthal

Introduction

This chapter will focus on United States global counterterrorism efforts and the need for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of female roles within these terrorist organizations. As has been discussed previously in this paper, women are being used to evade local security forces, subsequently conducting fatal attacks. Not only is knowledge of their roles important for preventing these attacks, it is necessary to understand the entire structure of these organizations, from the home to the battlefield and everywhere in between. It will address why women are joining these groups, why their roles within these groups are expanding, and how this information is useful in not only disarming and demobilizing them but reintegrating them into society as well. As the tactics of these groups evolves so, too, must US policy on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR).

The War on Terror, which the United States entered into following the attack on September 11th, 2001, is unlike other wars our country has fought. The complexities of fighting a non-state entity make the war against Islamic extremists especially difficult. The

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United States has used DDR as a post-conflict strategy for supporting peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts for the past 25 years.⁶¹

It is widely accepted that gender-based DDR is necessary and most state and public organizations implement gender specific approaches to this process. However, the strategy lacks a comprehensive gender-based approach that utilizes the research presented in this thesis. There is a common narrative that portrays women in one of three ways, referred to by some as “mothers, monsters, and whores”.⁶² This embodies the idea that women may only be viewed in three ways: traditionally as mothers, as crazed actors of violence, or sexually. In reference to this school of thought, women involved with Islamic extremism fall into the “monster” category. This thought process, however, removes their agency as independent actors. The past narrative of women in Islamic extremist groups addressed only those in foundational roles, fulfilling the “mother” aspect of this. Today, women are performing operational roles within Islamic extremism and the majority of them are depicted as being forced against their will, coerced, or even brainwashed, although research reveals this is not the case. To break away from this false narrative, it is important to understand the reasons women join these groups and participate in the various roles they do. This understanding will strengthen counterterrorism and DDR efforts for the U.S. and its allies.

The Analysis section of this chapter will discuss various DDR strategies used in conflict areas affected by Sunni extremism. As women’s involvement in Islamic extremism

⁶¹ “DDR, De-Radicalization and Countering Violent Extremism | Centre for Security Governance,” accessed February 8, 2019, <http://secgovcentre.org/2015/06/reading-list-ddr-de-radicalization-and-countering-violent-extremism/>.

⁶² Laura Sjoberg and Caron e. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed, 2007), 4-5.

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has expanded beyond foundational roles, the need for DDR strategies that approach women by their various roles is necessary. These programs must take into consideration women's motivation for joining, the activities they participated in, and their individual needs from a community once they return. Their reason for joining is an important factor to consider, as there may be a need for deradicalization. If the women were coerced into joining because, perhaps they had no other options, they may require job skills training. Widowed or abused women with children may need family or other types of counseling.

Analysis

There are two general types of recruits in violent Islamic extremism: coerced and/or forced victims and willing participants. For al-Qaida, operating since 1988, it is possible many of the women were raised as members of this organization. However, for the relatively young organizations like Boko Haram and ISIS, this is not the case.

Though women may have been raised as members, these women may still be unwilling participants. If this is the case, it is likely that they perform a more foundational role by marrying soldiers, taking care of the home, and raising children. Women who are forced to perform operational roles against their will are more likely to have been abducted, as is the case with the young female suicide bombers used by Boko Haram. Women raised under al-Qaida rule know no other life, making it difficult for their reintegration into any other society. The ideology is likely deeply ingrained in them, making deradicalization a priority.

Boko Haram, created in 2002, has existed for less time than al-Qaida. While some women may have been raised within this organization, it is more likely the majority of their

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female members have joined as young adults. The group is infamous for abducting young girls, making it likely many of the female members are originally forced or coerced to join the group. Boko Haram has used girls as young as seven in bombing attacks. However, despite the group's *modus operandi* of abducting women, the Council on Foreign Relations reports a credible source in northeastern Nigeria as saying that the majority of women in Boko Haram are acting voluntarily.⁶³ This information suggests the need for deradicalization for these women as well as counseling. Many of the women were abducted by the group at a young age and human rights groups have reported that some women appeared to be "brainwashed" and experienced extensive psychological and physical abuse.⁶⁴

ISIS is the youngest of the three Islamic extremist organizations included in this paper, founded in 2004. Because of its powerful online recruiting efforts, women from all over the world have left their homes to join the group in Iraq and Syria. These women do not know what they will be doing when they arrive, but the roles vary widely. For those who decide the Islamic State is not something they want to be a part of, what roles they take on may determine their ability to return home, or anywhere for that matter.

Shamima Begum left London in 2015, moving to Syria to join the Islamic State. She married an ISIS fighter and they had three children (all 3 are no longer living). When she became pregnant with her third child she fled to a refugee camp in Syria. Begum hoped

⁶³ "Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency"

⁶⁴ "Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency"

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to return to England before the birth of her third child but British Security Minister, Ben Wallace, was not willing to send aid to Syria to bring her home.⁶⁵

Begum has had her British citizenship revoked under the British Nationality Act of 1981, rendering her stateless. In an interview with Sky News, Begum says it is impossible for her to live in the refugee camp forever. She believes she should be allowed to return to the UK, stating, “They don’t have any evidence against me doing anything dangerous... I was just a housewife... I never did anything dangerous.” She claims she stayed in the home, caring for her husband and children, that she never made any propaganda or participated in recruitment efforts. She says her rehabilitation would be difficult after everything she’s been through. She said she was inspired to join after viewing ISIS propaganda online.⁶⁶

The case of Shamima Begum is just one of many instances of female ISIS members attempting to return home after living under the Islamic State, only to be denied reentry. Hoda Muthana is a US citizen who joined the Islamic State in Syria in 2015 at the age of 20. She is now in a Syrian refugee camp near the Turkish border, hoping to return to the United States. Unlike Shamima Begum, there is clear evidence of Muthana contributing to ISIS propaganda and recruitment efforts. She used her now-deleted Twitter account to encourage others to join the Islamic State, tweeting, “Go on drive-bys and spill all of their blood, or rent a big truck and drive all over them”.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Shamima Begum and 19, “British Woman Who Joined ISIS In Syria As Teen Is Stripped Of U.K. Citizenship,” NPR.org, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/20/696155300/british-woman-who-joined-isis-in-syria-as-teen-is-stripped-of-u-k-citizenship>.

⁶⁶ “Shamima Begum: I Didn’t Do Anything Dangerous - YouTube,” accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWcJHxmXD1Q>.

⁶⁷ “‘ISIS Bride’ Hoda Muthana Was an ISIS Propagandist, Not Some Brainwashed Child,” Washington Examiner, February 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/isis-bride-hoda-muthana-was-an-isis-propagandist-not-some-brainwashed-child>.

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Her call to “drive all over them” predates the era of “truck jihad” which was used in attacks in France, Germany, Sweden, England, Spain, Canada, and New York in the years since her tweet. This shows the global impact that these individuals can have simply via social media. Now Muthana expresses regret, claiming she was brainwashed, and hopes of returning to the US.

Implications of Research

Current DDR approaches to Islamic extremism focus on these groups with the false premise that they are still adhering to their strict gender roles. US policy is not exempt from maintaining the false narrative of female combatants as solely victims. Research confirming a shift in females’ roles needs to be considered when determining counterterrorism and DDR policies.

Current gender-based reintegration and counter-radicalization programs do not acknowledge the extent of women’s roles within violent Islamic extremism. For proper reintegration, it is necessary to know their roles within the organizations as well as their reasons for joining and assuming these roles.

There are several global non-governmental organizations involved in DDR. The Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration Training Group (IDDRTG), the Governance and Social Development Resource Center (DSDRC), and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) have programs for addressing the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of violent Islamic extremism. The Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) is a branch of the United Nations (UN) focusing on DDR efforts.

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The UN Global Counter-Terrorism strategy did not mention gender specifically until it was revised in 2014.⁶⁸ The United Nations' Operational Guide to DDR categorizes women into three categories, similarly to this paper: female combatants, female supporters, and female dependents. A clear distinction the UN uses to approach DDR of women is whether they are independent (economically and socially) within the group.⁶⁹ While this approach to DDR has gender specific aspects, considering the woman's role within the group, it focuses on their needs as a woman, not necessarily specifically as a terrorist spy, combatant, cook, etc.

The United States has implemented Security Sector Reform (SSR) programs through the Agency for International Development, the Department of the Defense, and the Department of State. DDR is included among activities under the SSR, however it does not take a gender-based approach. However, the United States Institute of Peace encourages a gender perspective for DDR and peace efforts.

The US Department of State released a strategy to support women and girls at risk for violent extremism and conflict in February. One of the four objectives include countering women's roles in terrorism. The document stated its efforts include, "countering women's roles as terrorist actors; addressing women's disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration".⁷⁰ The strategy does address women's varying roles within Islamic extremism but does not address the importance of understanding why they joined, why

⁶⁸ Iffat Idris, "Women and Countering Violent Extremism," n.d., 36.

⁶⁹ "Operational Guide.Pdf," accessed March 25, 2019, <http://unddr.org/uploads/documents/Operational%20Guide.pdf>.

⁷⁰ "U.S. Strategy to Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism and Conflict," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 25, 2019, <http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/priorities/wps/289431.htm>.

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they are assuming the specific roles they are, and how those roles affect their needs regarding rehabilitation and reintegration.

For women in Muslim nations, trying to reintegrate into society after participating in a terrorist organization can be particularly problematic. They face a myriad of struggles including the transition from a position of freedom and empowerment to a position in society as a second-class citizen. Not only are many of these societies oppressive towards women, outside organizations and DDR programs attempt to push female ex-combatants into traditional gender normative roles.⁷¹ Although the women may have gained valuable strengths and skills during combat, they are forced to abandon these active and empowering duties upon return to the stable, patriarchal society.

Women may also struggle with stigmas when returning to normal society. If they have participated as combatants, it may be seen as a sign of their loss of femininity. Even women who have not participated directly in combat are stigmatized. Many women are either left by their wartime husbands or were forced to leave them when fleeing. The women are left to raise and support their children alone in a society where they are likely unable to receive substantial work opportunities.

Women are usually excluded from post-war political structures and militaries.⁷² While some women in these organizations have spent years as soldiers, they are unable to fill a similar role upon reintegration because they are women. They have spent years developing certain skills and capabilities and are no longer permitted to pursue jobs in the realm of their strengths and experience. Many women are reintegrated into society as

⁷¹ "Women in Conflict"

⁷² "Women in Conflict"

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mothers without a husband and with limited possibilities for work under the extensively patriarchal society. They have no means for supporting themselves or their children.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the United States' current policy approach to Islamic terrorism and the shortcomings due to a lack of understanding and recognition of women's roles. The shift from foundational to limited to operational roles for women in Islamic extremist groups has been slow and somewhat subtle and the idea of a submissive and controlled woman has been so ingrained in the world's approach to terrorism that it has made it difficult to adjust to this change. However, we are increasingly seeing women in limited and operational roles in these extremist groups and it is vital to counterterrorism efforts to acknowledge this.

There are many reasons women are joining these extremist groups – coercion/force, falling prey to online recruitment efforts, self-radicalizing, hope for a better life – and it would benefit CVE efforts in the United States and abroad to apply this evolving understanding of women in terrorism. Knowing the particulars of *why* women join will help counter recruitment.

Understanding why women's roles have expanded is beneficial to deterring them from taking on these operational roles. It is widely known that women are performing operational roles within violent Islamic extremist groups, therefore the US and allied nations must adjust our strategies to more effectively combat these groups and their evolving tactics and structures. A necessary step is training US military personnel and out

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allied forces, such as the Iraqi Defense Forces (IDF), on how to approach women in these groups with the knowledge that they may be dangerous combatants.

Our post-conflict approach can be improved by applying this research, however, further research into the particularities of *why* women join these groups and assume combative roles could assist in preventing and countering recruitment efforts. It is difficult to obtain information on the specific mentalities within these extremist groups, although it is exactly that which largely dictates how the culture and structure will shift. This is a key piece of information that is difficult to ascertain but can provide valuable insight into the tactics and strategies these groups will use.

Outlook

Adequate approaches to CVE and DDR is the first step in the success of these programs. To do so, it is necessary to have an accurate knowledge base of the structure and functions of the targeted organizations. A binary approach that looks at men and women as two distinct sets of actors with generalized levels of participation is flawed and does not allow for the most accurate approach. As the research presented in this thesis illustrates, women's roles are becoming increasingly complex as the shift from foundational to limited operation to fully operation roles continues to develop. To maintain the narrative that women only serve in the home and are acting ignorantly or unwillingly removes their agency, hindering opposition forces' ability to properly assess and respond to the actions of these extremist organizations.

As stated in Chapter 4, women are becoming more involved with the decision-making process and, although the groups are reluctant to acknowledge so, beginning to

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hold positions of leadership and power. The Al-Khanssaa Brigade is just one example of how these groups are increasingly utilizing their female participants in more meaningful and operation capacities. Comparisons and contrasts were drawn between secular extremist groups and sunni extremist groups in Chapter 1 that revealed the religious groups are beginning to adopt practices the secular groups have practiced for decades. If this pattern continues, it is plausible to predict that women's roles within Sunni extremist groups will continue to expand. In time, the world may see Muslim women commanding military units comprised of men and women, delivering speeches on behalf of their organizations, and serving as high ranking officials among the groups' leadership.

This awareness reveals a need for further research on the future structure of these groups as the shift in women's roles further develops. It begs the question, *how will this adaptation of women's place in Sunni extremist groups affect their recruitment of women?* It will likely have a positive impact on their numbers of female recruits which will affect counter-radicalization efforts. It would be valuable to learn if this research is applicable to Shia organizations. This would allow for further understanding behind *why* the shift has and is occurring in the Sunni extremist groups. Adapting ideology as well as necessity are driving this shift, but is one a stronger influencer than the other? A look at women in Shia extremist groups may provide answers to that question.

The shift in women's roles in Sunni extremist groups is likely a continuing development that will ultimately result in drastic restructuring of these organizations and increasingly affect the ways they operate. Expanding the areas of operation of a large portion of their members only makes these groups stronger. Opposition forces must

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acknowledge this continuing shift to maintain an accurate understanding of these groups' operations for adequate CVE and DDR efforts.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Examples of Roles Broken Down by Group			
	Foundational Roles	Limited Operational Roles	Operational Roles
ISIS	<p><u>"Amy"</u> Canadian woman converted to Islam and moved to Syria with her husband to join ISIS Now a widow of 2 ISIS soldiers and mother of 3, she is trying to return to Canada</p>	<p><u>Hoda Muthana</u> left Arizona to join ISIS in Syria used Twitter to propagate ISIS propaganda and recruit US citizens to join her cause</p>	<p><u>Dian Yulia Novi</u> first woman in Indonesia to be convicted of plotting a bomb attack made a pressure cooker bomb to detonate at the Indonesian presidential palace scheme was foiled when her house was raided by police</p>
Al-Qaida	<p>Al-Qaida women's magazine, al-Beituki, instructs women to greet their husbands when they return home, prepare their dinner and their bed, and to not dabble in their work</p>	<p><u>Hila al-Qusair</u> al-Qaida fundraiser in Yemen who was arrested in Saudi Arabia in 2010</p>	<p>US Navy Seal team took fire while raiding an al-Qaida compound in Yemen. Female combatants were among the al-Qaida fighters taking up firing positions from rooftops</p>
Boko Haram	<p><u>Aisha Ali</u> widow of Boko Haram soldier and mother of 8 currently receiving counseling and skills training as part of rehabilitation efforts</p>	<p><u>Hafsat Bako</u> widow of Boko Haram soldier continued with the terror group, specializing in recruitment</p>	<p><u>Amina</u> 16 year old girl from Chad married a man who she later learned was a Boko Haram militant manipulated, drugged, and forced into an attempted suicide attack She and 3 other girls carried bombs strapped to their bodies as they canoed toward a crowded market 2 girls, not including Amina, detonated their belts</p>

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